

Nibble Rabbit Learns His Fortune

by John Breck

Not one of the Woodsfolk could make a sound. It was all so sudden it took their breath away. Then the sparrows began to flutter and chirp in their noisy way, and Chatter Squirrel said to nobody in particular, "Great acorns! but that was exciting! One minute Glider is playing a trick on Bobby Robin, and the next Silvertip jumps up from nowhere at all and plays the biggest trick on Glider! Whew!"

"Well," answered Nibble Rabbit, "I've just been thinking that it doesn't matter to me which eats which. They're both tried to eat me since morning." He was still the little brown knot on his log that he had frozen into when Silvertip came past. "Chatter, is Silvertip looking?"

"No. He's spread out in the sun sleeping off his meal," answered Chatter, craning his neck to see where Nibble was hidden. And his eyes fairly popped when that little brown knot slipped down from the far side of the log and limped away.

He limped—for not only was Nibble a very tired rabbit from sitting so still, but his little mud boots that he got in the Broad Field when he was running away from Glider were all stiff and uncomfortable. How he did want a wash and a drink and a place to rest!

He could hear water whispering not far away, but he didn't dare go through the tunnels in the Prickly Ash Thicket to get to it. So he didn't find the brook he knew. He went farther down where it spread out into a broad pond. It was all edged with reeds and rushes that had some delicious watercress growing up between their roots. He could step on the last year's stalks which had been bent down by the Winter Wind and keep his feet safe from the sticky mud below. Pretty soon he found a little raft hidden in the middle of a clump of cattails.

"This is the place for me," he said to himself. "It's warm in the sun and snug from the wind, and nobody'll ever find me." So he curled up and went fast asleep.

He awoke to feel a shadow falling across him. He looked up into the homeliest face he had ever seen. It was pointed, like his own, but fatter, and it had little cropped ears and sleepy, blinky eyes, and long yellow teeth that flashed when it said severely: "What are you doing here?"

Poor Nibble! He was only half awake. He had forgotten where he was, and it's rabbit nature to jump first and think while you run. He jumped. His feet slipped, he splashed and the water closed over his long ears.

Then didn't he kick and strangle! No sooner did he get his poor little nose out than it went under again. But the second time the green water parted and his scared eyes could see the rushes waving in the lovely air, and his lungs could get one more breath that tasted as sweet as clover in the spring, he felt a grip on the back of his neck. A gruff voice growled: "Take your time. You should learn to swim."

The next thing he knew he was being shaken very hard. "Cough!" ordered the gruff voice. "Shake your head till you get the water out of your ears! Now eat this!" And Nibble swallowed a peppery bite of root that made his eyes pop, and set the tears streaming down his whiskers.

“Who are you?” he gasped.

“Doctor Muskrat, of course,” answered the voice. “You couldn’t be in better paws.” But poor Nibble Rabbit thought he couldn’t very well be in worse ones. Which was very ungrateful.

“I’d rather be eaten than choked to death,” he thought. “But this awful old animal is perfectly satisfied with himself for doing it! Ah! Oh! Uh-huh!” he coughed. And Doctor Muskrat sat back and looked more wise and pleased than ever.

“I knew that would open your eyes,” he explained. “It was a flagroot gnawed in the wax of the moon. You see I know what every plant in the marsh is good for and I dry them for my medicine chest.”

“What would have happened if you hadn’t given it to me?” asked Nibble weakly.

“I didn’t risk it,” said Doctor Muskrat, “so of course I don’t know. I gave you the proper remedy as soon as you could swallow, so of course you’re all right now.

“In the full of the moon
Eyes open soon.
Plucked in the wane
Eyes close again,”

he quoted. “That’s the rule for flagroot. Now I’ll put you to sleep with the other dose if you need a rest and I’ll stay right here and watch you.”

“Oh, no!” protested Nibble. He was just beginning to breathe and he didn’t want any more of kind Doctor Muskrat’s medicines. “I must look for my mother, under Hooter the Owl’s tree.”

“First,” said the doctor looking at him very severely, “you must clean yourself up and put your fur in order. If your feet hadn’t been all caked with mud you wouldn’t have slipped.”

“They were very uncomfortable, too,” Nibble agreed, glad that his swim had melted his boots, at last. “I kept them on so Glider the Blacksnake couldn’t track me.” And he told his experience with Glider and the Fox.

“Nevertheless,” said Doctor Muskrat, “you weren’t safe because you couldn’t keep your nose clean and smell all around you, nor your ears clean, so you could hear. Always be sure you know everything about it before you decide to try something new. For instance, rabbits don’t belong in a marsh, do they?”

“No,” murmured Nibble, “But it looked so hidden and so safe.”

“So hidden,” Doctor Muskrat snorted. “It’s a mercy it was I who found you and not Slyfoot the Mink. So safe that you nearly drowned when you tried to get away. Now you say you want to visit the owl’s tree. Is that any place for a rabbit? Answer me that!”

“No,” wailed Nibble. “But I want my mother and I don’t know where else to look. If that old owl did catch her he might as well take me too. Glider the Blacksnake ’most did, and Silvertip nearly

ate me instead of him. He might as well. Nobody cares, anyhow, if my mother's gone. Why didn't you just let me drown?" Which was no way at all of thanking Doctor Muskrat for having rescued him. And tears of sorrow mingled with the tears that came from the awful medicine the old Doctor had given him.

But Doctor Muskrat's feelings weren't hurt in the least. He could see that poor little Nibble was badly scared and all clammy and cold from his ducking besides. "What you need," he said in his gruff voice, trying to make it sound really kind, "is a nap and some light but refreshing nourishment. What'll it be—a fat frog? No? I forgot that all of us don't eat the same things. Let's see—" He thought a minute and Nibble could see his nose twitch as though he imagined he were sniffing things as they came into his mind. Then he licked his lips. "I know," he said, and at the word his scaly tail cut the water like a knife where it closed behind his vanishing heels.

A minute passed, two, four. What had happened to him? Nibble began to remember how ungrateful he had been. He also remembered that Slyfoot the Mink might be creeping up, or the Brown March Hawk peering about as he flew by. He craned his neck and saw something floating down from upstream as softly as a stick in the current. It was the fat old doctor with a big root in his mouth.

He slipped up beside Nibble without a sound. "I had to scour the bottom to find this," he explained. "It's water chinquapin and it has properties."

He said this so mysteriously that Nibble dared not ask him what "Properties" were, so he tasted a little, very carefully, to see. Did you ever taste a water chinquapin yourself? It's delicate and jelly-like, but so sweet and rich that you'd risk stepping on old Grandpop Snapping Turtle himself to get some more. Nibble scraped the very rind of it. And then he thanked Doctor Muskrat for taking so much trouble over him.

"Well," growled the old doctor in a very pleased tone, "I'm glad you have found your manners, if not your courage. Now snuggle up and go to sleep." And so Nibble cuddled against him in a nice warm lump to sleep off his fullness.

He didn't wake until the pink reflections from the setting sun were dying out of the west and stars were already twinkling in the sky. Doctor Muskrat was studying their reflections where they sparkled in the pool. He was saying something to himself.

"By dusk and by dawn he shall travel alone
And all troubles are his excepting his own."

"Is that right?" and he pricked his ears. Nibble's own ears flew up, but he couldn't hear a word from those stars, dancing softly on the water in the night wind. That was because this was deep and secret magic.

"You awake?" asked Doctor Muskrat. "Well, that fortune was yours. I asked the stars most particularly. They wouldn't tell me anything about your mother, but from the way they're smiling I feel sure you're going to find her in the end. They did say that Slyfoot had gone across the pond, so you had better hurry to the bank and find the quail."

Which last was strictly true and not magic at all, because the stars had danced very hard in Slyfoot's ripples.

Source:

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